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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Vietnamese Settlement in Kampuchea

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Summary

Foreign Ministers of the ASEAN states have over the past few months accused Vietnam of deliberately colonizing Kampuchea they are likely to raise this issue at the UN General Assembly this month. Evidence to support--or refute--this claim is extremely limited. Data gathered from refugees and Western diplomats suggest that Vietnamese settlement in Kampuchea is increasing, but it has yet to reach pre-1970 levels. The increase does not appear to be government-directed.

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We believe that Hanoi retains colonization as a policy option and that the Vietnamese would not hesitate to implement such a policy if they believed it essential to maintaining control over Kampuchea. Moreover, any significant increase in the size of the Vietnamese community--whether or not it is government-directed--will result in an increase in violence inside Kampuchea.

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Eliminating the Vietnamese 1970-78

Prior to Lon Nol's coup against Prince Sihanouk in March 1970, there were 500,000 Vietnamese living in Kampuchea. They had been introduced under the French as rubber plantation workers

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and commercial fishermen and had formed permanent settlements along the Tonle Sap and the Mekong River. Eventually, they assumed a major role in Kampuchea's towns and cities as petty traders and semiskilled workers, earning much resentment from local Kampucheans in the process. [redacted]

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The Lon Nol coup brought on anti-Vietnamese pogroms, and marked the beginning of a decade-long decimation of the settler community. Thousands of ethnic Vietnamese were killed, and thousands more fled to Vietnam's Mekong Delta provinces. Under Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea government (1975-78), many of the remaining settlers were swept up in the massacres conducted by the Khmer Rouge and more ethnic Vietnamese fled to join the earlier refugees in southern Vietnam. [redacted]

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Renewed Settlement

Following Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea in 1978, refugees and defectors report that many of these former residents began to return, reclaiming lost property and reoccupying their economic niche. Some, according to official Phnom Penh media, were joined by relatives who had not lived in Kampuchea. [redacted]

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The returnee population and their relatives were supplemented by other southern Vietnamese new to Kampuchea. The newcomers were spurred by two factors: an increased rate of military induction as Hanoi expanded its armed forces from 600,000 to one million troops, and a crackdown on Vietnamese society in the south that involved closing shops, forced agricultural collectivization, and the massive relocation of urban dwellers to remote, undeveloped New Economic Zones. These new arrivals appear to have moved into the same occupations traditionally held by the Vietnamese. [redacted]

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Based on diplomatic reporting, we believe that the heavily urban character of Kampuchea's Vietnamese population began to change in late 1981 with the arrival of farmers in Kampuchea's eastern border provinces--especially Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, Kandal, and Takev. Because of the contradictory and sporadic nature of the reporting, we are uncertain whether these Vietnamese displaced Kampuchean farmers or simply occupied land abandoned during Pol Pot's regime, when the Kampuchea-Vietnam border became a no man's land. In any event, Thai officials now estimate the Vietnamese population in Kampuchea to be between 300,000 and 400,000. [redacted]

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Is Vietnam Colonizing Kampuchea?

In our estimation, Hanoi does not have a centrally directed program to resettle Vietnamese in Kampuchea. During the years immediately following the occupation, we believe both Hanoi and Phnom Penh tried to prevent the settlement of some Vietnamese. Deserters, in particular, had become involved in banditry or the crossborder smuggling trade between Thailand and Kampuchea. One 1980 refugee report states that Vietnamese officials in the Mekong Delta province of Hau Giang prohibited the movement of Vietnamese into Kampuchea. [redacted]

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If Hanoi had sought to use colonization as a means of creating a manageable, loyal Kampuchea, we would have expected to receive reporting of the establishment of settlements similar to the New Economic Zone settlements in the Central Highlands. We have not. Nor have we received [redacted] reports about official mobilization of Vietnamese cadre or the general population for such a move, and we have seen no government or party documents that indicate such an event is imminent. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, there appears to have been a shift in the attitude of Vietnamese authorities, who are no longer trying to prevent Vietnamese immigration. By April 1982, [redacted] Vietnamese farmers were moving in greater numbers into the border provinces and around the Tonle Sap. [redacted]

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The 20 July 1983 border treaty between Vietnam and the PRK, moreover, indicates the PRK's inability to protect its borders from Vietnamese encroachment. The treaty forced the PRK to accept an unfavorable border delineation--one that Sihanouk had refused to accept when he was in power. An agreement on maritime zones, signed on 7 July 1982, deprived the PRK of several islands off its coast that it had held or claimed previously. [redacted]

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Increased Tension Likely

Should Hanoi decide to sanction officially colonization in an attempt to build a politically reliable segment of the population in Kampuchea, we would expect a significant increase

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in the level of tension between the two peoples. One reason is that the Vietnamese, and not the PRK, administer the settler community. Two documents issued last year--one a circular from the Central Committee of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party and the second a PRK Council of Ministers circular--instructed PRK officials to "consult Vietnamese experts" when dealing with the settlers and when arranging to meet with influential Vietnamese within the communities. Refugee and defector accounts repeatedly maintain that Vietnamese lawbreakers are handled by Vietnamese--not Kampuchean--officials. 25X1

Secondly, any sanctioned increase in settlers will probably result in a higher proportion of Vietnamese farmers in Kampuchea. Because Kampuchean society is overwhelmingly rural, the basically urban Vietnamese community until now has had only occasional contact with most Kampucheans. As the 1970s massacres show, even these limited contacts were enough to bring subsurface racial animosities to violence. A growing rural Vietnamese settlement would increase contacts between the two communities and heighten competition between the two groups over the highly productive rice land. We have already received refugee reports that Kampucheans believe land disputes are always adjudicated in favor of the Vietnamese settlers. 25X1

Increased rural Vietnamese settlement may already be triggering violent reprisals from the resistance. 25X1

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